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ABSTRACT

The hypothesis tested in this study was the statement that teachers reflect what they have been taught--that teaching is a direct presentation of a specified curriculum and the direct reinforcement of students' correct responses to the curriculum. A survey of 455 graduate students called for scale responses about several theories of learning as well as theories of pedagogy: (1) classical conditioning; (2) Thorndike-Skinnerian operant conditioning; (3) Gagne's task cognitive theory; (4) Piaget's cognitive development theory; (5) information systems--cognitive learning theory; (6) Bandura's social learning theory; and (7) White's psychology of pedagogy. Responses indicated that the subjects' belief system about teaching was patterned after a direct teaching style, was methods oriented, and used positive external reinforcement as a tool to change behavior. It is hypothesized that the teachers of today are probably reflecting the theory and methods of their teacher training programs. Methods courses and reinforcement strategies dominated the pedagogical practice of the past 20 years; however, principles of learning and of pedagogy based on social learning and information systems should occupy the stage of importance in the decade of the '90s. (JD)

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Teacher Perceptions Of A Psychology of Pedagogy

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Teacher Perceptions Of A Psychology of Pedagogy

The education reform movement has been focused on teacher competency, teaching strategies, teacher appraisal systems, the finance of educating a student, and teacher education programs, but not on teaching theory. In the search to evaluate the competency of the teacher, the competency of instruction, and the effectiveness of the public schools, there has been a broad inquiry into the nature of teaching. In higher education there has been an aggressive movement by the Carnegie Foundation, the Holmes Group (of colleges and universities), together with the legislature in several states to do away with the Bachelor of Education Degree and cap the number of education courses that a pre-teacher might include in his program of study. The education reform movement is eliminating education courses and teacher education programs. The student preparing to be a teacher must major in a discipline, e.g., mathematics, English, history, etc. Education courses would be limited to a few courses, e.g., four in Texas, and the certified teacher would graduate with a major in a discipline, four courses in education, and supervised student teaching (generally, 6 semester hours).

A basic assumption has prevailed in the reform movement, namely, that all teachers and educators have a common view of how learning takes place in a student and how effective teaching practice should occur. Indeed, the assumption is expanded to project that there is one method, or mode, of teacher practices. The summary statement of assumptions is the belief that teaching is a collection of methods and practices which one can find in a book or by listening to the advice of experienced teachers. The important element is knowledge of the discipline. All children, for the most part, learn the same way. The hypothesis tested, here, was the statement that teacher reflect what they have been taught -- that teaching is a direct presentation of a specified curriculum and the direct reinforcement of students' correct responses to the curriculum.

Procedure

A survey of 455 graduate students at a university in Southeast Texas was conducted using a 70 item, four case instrument. Teachers responded to voluntarily and anonymously to the instrument. Teachers represented the full range of grade levels and special education in public school instruction. The total sample of 455 graduate students comprised 63 percent of early childhood elementary, and middle school teachers; 12 percent counselors and school administrators; 9 percent special education; and 16 percent senior high school teachers. Eighty nine percent of the sample was female. All graduates were at the master's level of graduate study.

The instrument presented to the graduate students contained 70 items, each response scaled on five points, and four case studies. The survey called for scaled responses about several theories of learning as well as theories of pedagogy: (a) classical conditioning, (b) Thorndike-Skinnerian operant conditioning, (c) Gagne's task cognitive theory, (d) Piaget's cognitive development theory, (e) Information systems - cognitive learning theory, (f) Bandura's social learning theory, and (g) White's psychology of pedagogy (1989).

Results

Responses by the 455 graduate students to the 70 items relating to theory and the 30 items relating to the case studies were factor analyzed by the principal components method. Six factors were rotated to the varimax. Factor I contributed 21 percent to the cumulative proportion of the variance. The 18 items loading on this factor were given the label of "Direct teaching style." The second factor contained 15 items and contributed 18 percent to the cumulative variance. Factor II was labeled "Social learning and information systems theory." The third factor added only 6 percent to the total variance and was labeled "Psychology of pedagogy." Each of the fourth, fifth, and sixth factors contributed 4 percent or lower to the cumulative variance.

Discussion

When the factor structure of the response of the 455 graduate students to the survey of teaching -- learning theory was examined, the belief system about teaching was patterned after a direct teaching style, methods oriented, using positive external reinforcement as a tool to change behavior. This belief about the teacher-learner process emerged out of an operant conditioning theory of learning prevalent in the 1950's and 1960's. The teacher presented the lesson plan, the prescribed curriculum, through the textbooks, diagrams on the blackboard, the lesson plans and the oral discussion. The students reacted to the lesson presented and responded orally and in writing to the questions and examinations. The teacher reinforced the correct responses and failed to respond to the incorrect responses. Punishment or negative reinforcement was frowned upon. According to the belief system of contemporary graduate students in this sample, there is one way, a correct way to teach students. Teacher training programs present the best methods in presenting information to students.

The textbooks which have followed a Thorndike-Skinnerian theory of learning have also presented a methodology in teaching. Reward or reinforcement causes the change in behavior. Directly presenting the lesson plans, the objectives of the course or lesson, generates the stimulus conditions for learning. In this group of 455 graduate students the theory about teaching has correspondence with Skinner's belief about learning. Teachers appear to be left with the single theory that all learning is S-R theory -- that all learning is blind, non-thinking, and mechanical. Reward or reinforcement is the essential element in teaching and learning.

The graduate students also recognized social learning theory and an information systems explanation of learning. A psychology of pedagogy built on those two theories appears to be well identified. Learning takes place through the observation of models, observed consequences to the actions of the models, and the information systems flow

through the internal cognitive processes of the learner. These graduate students recognized that there were three kinds of reinforcement: direct, vicarious, or emotional, and self. Although this sample of graduate students recognized the components of pedagogy in social learning and information systems theory, they still believed and adhered to a Skinnerian theory of 30 years ago.

We must be very cautious in generalizing from the data of this sample of graduate students. It is hypothesis generating, however, that the teachers of today are probably reflecting the theory and methods of their teacher-training programs. Methods courses and reinforcement strategies dominated pedagocial practice of the last 20 years. The perception of teachers in the 1990's must be influenced by the theory and research of this era. Principles of learning and of pedagogy based on social learning and information systems should occupy the stage of importance in the decade of the 90's.

No viewpoint appears to be more important than the student must be taught self discipline or self regulatory behavior. Students must accept the responsibility of learning. Teachers should no longer be perceived as the cognitive stuffers of information and skills. Teachers should no longer be held accountable as the only teaching agent in student's learning and whose pedagogy is the delivery of reinforcement to "correct" behavior. Students must be self-motivating and self-regulating if quality instruction is to take place.